WORLD CHRONICLE

UNITED NATIONS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DURATION: 28' 01" TRANSCRIPT AS BROADCAST

PROGRAMME: "WORLD CHRONICLE"

GUEST: Patricia Weiss-Fagen
Public Information Officer
U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees

JOURNALISTS: Raghida Dergham, Al-Hayat, London
Ian Steele, Press Foundation of Asia
Linda Fasulo, WNYC Broadcasting

MODERATOR: Claude Robinson

SYNOPSIS

Patricia Weiss-Fagen, Public Information Officer for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, explains how the Agency protects and assists more than fourteen million refugees around the world at the present time. She says the gap between available funds and the need for refugee assistance is widening. More voluntary contributions are necessary if the Agency is to carry out its mandate effectively.

"WORLD CHRONICLE" is produced by the Information Products Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, N.Y. 10017, USA.

Executive Producer: Yuanchi Chen
Director: Livingston Hinckley
Production Assistant: Diane Barkley

Programme No. 380

90-43594

VOICE From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an uneconomical interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

ROBINSON: I'm Claude Robinson and this is **World Chronicle**.

Driven by war or civil strife, political or religious persecution, famine, poverty, tens of millions of people are forced to flee from their homelands in search of a safe heaven. They've become the powerless, the voiceless and, in many cases, the unwanted refugees. Where can they turn for help? Do they have any rights as human beings?

Our guest today, Patricia Weiss-Fagen of the United States, is Public Information Officer for the Office of the UNHCR, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which is currently caring for 14 million refugees worldwide. Dr. Fagen will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Raghida Dergham of Al-Hayat, and Arabic daily of London; Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia; and Linda Fasulo of WNYC Broadcasting.

For some background information, here is a report from our correspondent, Steve Whitehouse.

WHITEHOUSE: Throughout history, people have been uprooted against their will, fleeing injustice and persecution. As we move towards the end of the 20th century, we are witnessing the most massive displacement of humans of all time. Today, there are some 14 million refugees and displaced people around the world. Wars, civil strife, and natural disasters have caused this exodus.

The immediate concern of refugees is getting daily necessities. They rely almost entirely on external help. The relief assistance provided by national and international agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is barely enough to sustain them. The primary responsibility for assisting refugees rests with host countries. But the recent influx of refugees, particularly in developing countries, has strained the already frail economies and limited resources of host countries.

In San Jose, for example, the issue for Costa Rica's government is that in addition to 40,000 official refugees, up to 250,000 illegal migrants have arrived, representing perhaps ten percent of the country's population.

President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica ...
(Arias: In Spanish)

WHITEHOUSE: He explains that his country does not want to discriminate between Costa Ricans and other Central Americans but he points out that Costa Rica has to make a major effort to meet the basic needs of all refugees in fields such as education, health services, food and housing.

In Hong Kong, the flood of Indo-Chinese refugees began in 1975. Since 1983, new arrivals have been detained in isolated camps, perhaps permanently, as more and more countries close their borders for resettlement. These Ethiopians refugees in Sudan are relatively fortunate. With small loans from international agencies, they are able to make a living working productively while waiting to go home.

There have been some success stories. Regional settlements in Southern African, for example, enabled 41,000 Namibian exiles to return home to participate in their country's independence process. Such voluntary repatriation is the desired goal. But until the underlying political and economic causes are tackled, millions of refugees will remain in a world of camps without exits.

ROBINSON: Dr. Fagen, the underlying political and economic causes of the growing problem, 14 million refugees. What are these political and economic problems? Why are they so difficult that you can't overcome them?

WEISS-FAGEN: The UNHCR as you know is charged to take care of the consequences of war and political violence and we don't address the root causes. Nevertheless, increasingly in the UNHCR, there is a recognition that unless the international community can address root causes, can bring peace, that the refugees are going to continue and continue and continue. One impression I want to correct, not correct but just comment on that came on the credits and in your comments. People indeed flee for reasons of political violence, political repression, religious persecution and poverty and famine, yet the UNHCR's mandate is limited to people whose exile is due to political causes.

READEX FICHE

ROBINSON: So the rest of the people who flee for those other reasons are not part of your mandate?

WEISS-FAGEN: Officially no. In practice ....

ROBINSON: Does that mean that they have more than 14 million displaced persons in that sense?

WEISS-FAGEN: Oh, absolutely. If you're counting in your category of displaced persons one, people who haven't left their country of origin; that is people who may be displaced, may have left their communities for all the enumerated reasons of political persecution, of religious persecution or repression and yet they haven't crossed an international border, they are not within UNHCR's mandate normally, or people who fled because of famine, because of poverty who may -- I've often used the expression that people can have a well founded fear of death for a variety of reasons and yet not be under UNHCR 's mandate. In practice, it's mixed because people who flee for famine are often fleeing for religious persecution or political persecution or other reasons.

DERGHAM: On the top of the show in that segment that we saw from Steve Whitehouse there was a peculiar reference to the boat people in Hong Kong where they are being isolated in camps versus the refugees in Sudan where it's suggested that they are being settled better and ready to readapt and go back home. Isn't that ironic that the haves of the countries such as the United Kingdom versus the have nots, such as Sudan, are having the reverse experience experiment could expect?

WEISS-FAGEN: What happens is that refugees flee. They flee to wherever they can go. The countries to which these refugees flee may, and usually often do -- not the

industrialized countries but Third World countries -- ask the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to come and care for the refugees, to establish camps and to care for the refugees. That said, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees cares for the refugees always within the political framework of the country involved. We have to work with the governments who invite us to come. We have our own principles and we do our very best to assure that the refugees live in conditions that are minimally comfortable, decent, that they have access to protection, that they have access to people who can help them find durable solutions. Nevertheless we don't have absolute control over the conditions in which refugees live in the various countries to which they go.

DERGHAM: So what do you do for example or what is the position of UNHCR on the position on the United Kingdom as far as mandatory repatriation for the Indochinese refugees? Do you have a position; do you try to help; do you try to convince the government concerned that its position may be harmful for those refugees concerned?

WEISS-FAGEN: Can I back track just a little bit on that because in Hong Kong, first of all its not really a situation between Hong Kong, the UK and the refugees. We are talking about a regional issue -- all of Southeast Asia. As you probably know, last June the various countries of the Southeast Asia region, plus the major European-North American powers, assembled in June to discuss the fate of the Southeast Asian refugees, in particular the Vietnamese refugees, the boat people, and reached an agreement and it was decided on what was called a comprehensive plan of action and everybody agreed to it. They agreed to it but there are a lot of points on which further negotiation was necessary. What they agreed to, the countries in Southeast Asia agreed that they would continue to

offer first asylum, refuge to people who entered their countries. The resettlement countries -- US, Canada, Australia and so on -- agreed that they would resettle several thousand refugees already in the countries of first asylum and then it was also agreed, and here again we are getting into the area that's a bit more controversial. Hong Kong had already begun screening procedures. Now screening procedures exist for refugees in most parts of the world, in the US, in the UK, in Canada, certainly in the industrialized countries. People who come to these countries are screened. Is this person a refugee, is this person not a refugee according to the refugee definition in the United Nations Convention relating to the status of refugees and the Protocol (well-founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, membership of a political group or social opinion) and if people are screened out in that process then they are by definition not refugees. Therefore, are we talking about forced repatriation or simple deportation, the way most countries deport persons whom they consider to be aliens on their territory. Our concerns, UNHCR's concerns, are the screening procedures, are they fair, and also the humanity of it. We would like to see and we had urged the international community, and with a good deal of support, not to deport people, not to forceably return people, to allow the option of voluntary repatriation to work its way, and we have been optimistic that eventually there would be a sizeable voluntary repatriation back to Vietnam. But it does take time and that's been the principal issue of contention. Now there was a recent meeting in January that I can discuss further if you want but I don't know if you want me to go into this.

ROBINSON: We may come back to that.

STEELE: The count on Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong late last year was something in the order of 57,000. How many of those does UNHCR recognize and how do you deal with that situation?

WEISS-FAGEN: You see UNHCR doesn't do the screening. The Hong Kong authorities do the screening just as in the UK the British authorities do it, in the US the US authorities do it. But we try to keep up with all of the cases that might be deported and people have the right to appeal and we have the right, the UNHCR has the right to say, "No, this person is as far as we're concerned a mandate refugee. We've reviewed the case and we consider this person a mandate refugee even if you authorities don't consider it so". Now none of the people who thus far have been deported or sent back fall into this category but I have to tell you that it's a difficult chore because we don't have enough officers in Hong Kong. We are too short of money to hire enough people to review all of the cases, especially if the returns are accelerated.

STEELE: You're really a captive of definitions here. I wonder whether the mandate itself is as current as you would wish it to be? In point of fact, 14 million refugees out of hundreds of thousands, millions of refugees by other standards, put you somewhere out in left field. How central are you to the refugee process as a global process and what influence can you bring to bear when your mandate is so limited and the numbers of persons you're dealing with is so small?

WEISS-FAGEN: I think 14 million, actually I'd say now its 14.5 million going on 15 million, is not small. That's the size of a medium-size country.

STEELE: True, but we are talking about several hundred thousands of people.

WEISS-FAGEN: In fact, I should say the definition I just quoted, which is the Convention definition, is pretty narrow. In Africa, the Organization of African Unity has a broader definition to which all the states subscribe which allows for inclusion people who are escaping because of generalized violence, foreign occupation, a variety of reasons which in fact count for a majority of refugees in Africa. The Central American countries as well, not quite as formally, but signed on to the Cartagena Agreement in 1984 which also has a broad definition and we certainly advocate a broader definition rather than a narrower definition.

STEELE: For UNHCR as well?

WEISS-FAGEN: UNHCR answers the call of the international community and we at times have served the needs of refugees or people who aren't quite refugees when asked by the international community. The Secretary-General, we respond.

ROBINSON: Before I turn the question over to Linda I just want to clarify your answer to Ian just a while ago. Was it your view that in fact we should expand the definition of a refugee to include the positions taken by both Africans and the Central Americans?

WEISS-FAGEN: One has to be realistic on this issue. An expanded definition would open for international care a much larger body of people but would the international community be willing to support the expanded care of this expanded definition.

ROBINSON: The programme is **WORLD CHRONICLE.** Our guest is Patricia Weiss-Fagen, Public Information Officer for the Office of the UNHCR, the United Nations for High Commissioner for Refugees.

FASULO: Dr. Fagen, earlier you alluded to the financial condition of the High Commission. What state is the High Commission in financially? Is there a crisis?

WEISS-FAGEN: In words of one syllable, yes there is a crisis. Let me say first of all we have to separate UNHCR from some of the other UN agencies. We are not funded on the same basis as most of the other UN agencies, we are funded almost entirely on the basis of voluntary contributions. We have an Executive Committee of 45 countries. We present, the UN staff presents its budget, the budget is discussed, the Executive Committee says, "Yes, looking at the state of the world's refugees that's the budget you need". That doesn't mean that they guarantee us the funds to cover that budget. Once the budget for general programmes is agreed then the various nations or private parties have to say, "Yes we are going to donate x amount of money to your needs". Furthermore, the budget that's agreed on by the ExCom cannot possibly include things that happen after ExCom. So if 300,000 refugees leave one country and go to another country after the budget has been agreed on then that requires a special appeal. Likewise, in a positive way, if the same number of refugees decide to go home that's also a special appeal and so everything we do relies on the goodwill of the international community to donate to refugee conditions, refugee causes, refugee situations. Our budget has gone up. It's gone up and gone up. The nations that support us have continued to support us and in fact they have given a little more and a little more but the difference between the little more and the need has grown. Therefore, we do have a very desperate financial situation. Last year, 1989, the budget was reduced considerably. We cut out a number of programmes, a number of programmes which personally I think were extremely important for refugees, especially in the areas of education, income generation, special programme for women, special

programme for children so on, things that in the long run reduce the dependency of refugees and in the long run I think perhaps cut costs because you produce more self-sufficient people. This year the cuts are even greater.

DERGHAM: Dr. Fagen, a little earlier Ian asked you about being a captive of definitions, UNHCR, and what you had said a bit earlier you also referred to the fact that you do not do the screening, that there are several limits imposed on UNHCR because of government. Are you also at the mercy of the government's whims and laws and considerations and at least as far as defining who is a refugee and who is not and then how to help further on the issue of the group of people involved?

WEISS-FAGEN: Obviously, our situation vis-a-vis governments varies from one country to another. A good deal depends on whether the governments have or have not signed the relevant UN documents -- the Convention and the Protocol. In countries where the government have signed the Convention or Protocol and have their own procedures and examine asylum seekers -- we're talking mostly about the industrialized countries -- then our job is to try to oversee those procedures and encourage governments to make them as generous and as fair as possible. In countries whose governments haven't signed then we often do the screening if they want us to, if the governments want us to.

DERGHAM: Again, the key words are encourage, if they want us to. These are the key words.

WEISS-FAGEN: We don't have an army.

DERGHAM: So actually where are you efficient and where can you execute the position of the UNHCR in terms of protecting the refugees themselves, for example when we have to decide whether they are political refugees or economic migrants? At least in that sense where are you effective?

WEISS-FAGEN: Obviously, what you're touching on is a real problem because as more and more people flee their homelands and go to other countries it becomes harder and harder to take care of everybody and governments to be sure become burned out if you like. They are tired of seeing so many people come in. That said, we have a mandate from the international community. Our strength and our ability to protect refugees in large part comes from the part that we are backed up by that international community and if governments ask for UNHCR's assistance, come, we want you to set up refugee camps, and that government, and I am not speaking of any particular government, but that government fails in the elemental task of protecting refugees, then we're not going to continue managing or running the camps or trying to care for refugees. There's a little bit of clout in there.

STEELE: Within the definition of persecution are there contingencies for Europe and Eastern Europe? Borders are opening and Eastern Europe is changing in ways that were inconceivable a year ago. Has the pace of change complicated the picture for UNHCR and is there a response mechanism in place in Europe today?

WEISS-FAGEN: Far from complicating it I think so far the response has been healthy. Hungary signed the Convention and Protocol last year. This was the first Eastern bloc nation to have signed the Protocol and we have an office now open in Budapest. It's been open for a matter of months, not really

very long, and the Hungarians were taking in Romanians, mostly ethnic Hungarian Romanians but Romanians in any event, and I think that movement is going to go forward and we are all looking forward to a greater participation of Eastern Europe in all of our activities.

FASULO: Dr. Fagen, voluntary repatriation is sometimes a solution for certain refugees. Does the High Commission have any kind of monitoring procedure or mechanism for overlooking the well-being of these people once they've returned to their countries?

WEISS-FAGEN: I'm glad you asked because that is one instance, one of many, in which the mandate has really expanded over the past years in particular, because more and more refugees who are repatriating are repatriating to conditions which are not all together perfect. That is, the government has not changed dramatically, they are still worried about what's going to happen to them, they're going back to poverty and they really need to be monitored and certainly we always operated under the principle that refugees need follow up. We give assistance and we follow up on the assistance and that assistance is understood to include not just the refugees repatriating but the local community to which they are repatriating. Lately we've also more and more acquired, if you like, a kind of protection role too because when refugees repatriate in large numbers what we usually do is orchestrate a tripartite agreement, the host country, the country of origin and UNHCR, and in the tripartite agreement the home country will agree to certain amnesties and guarantees and basically to allow the refugees to return in safety and dignity. That is our mandate to follow up on safety and dignity in the country of origin.

ROBINSON: If I might touch on another area of the world. The Soviet forces have left Afghanistan for sometime now, yet I think there are still over three million refugees in Pakistan. Are they going to stay there forever? What's going to happen to those people?

WEISS-FAGEN: There are over three million Afghan refugees in Pakhistan and over two million Afghan refugees in Iran plus Afghan refugees in a number of other countries in much smaller numbers and over a year ago the UN, not just UNHCR, was part of an overall UN plan to repatriate all the refugees and everybody knows that the Afghan refugees want to go home. Overwhelmingly they want to go home.

ROBINSON: What's keeping them?

WEISS-FAGEN: War. There continues to be fighting in Afghanistan and as a result over 70,000 new refugees have come out of Afghanistan, mostly into Pakistan. Some have gone back. There has been some voluntary repatriation but I think the net is still out rather than in and all I could say is once the fighting stops I think that repatriation will go forward and will go forward fast.

DERGHAM: Dr. Fagen, Jewish immigration from the Soviet Union into Israel, what kind of a flow of people in the number that it is happening right now? A thousand a week approximately? Under what category do they fall? Are they immigrants, are they refugees?

WEISS-FAGEN: They are not under our mandate because in effect they don't really become refugees. They leave the Soviet Union. Our job, our mandate, is to protect refugees, to assist refugees but essentially we're assigned the job of finding

durable solutions to refugees. The people who are leaving the Soviet Union and going to Israel already have a durable solution.

DERGHAM: Would you elaborate?

WEISS-FAGEN: A durable solution is, at least in the way we prioritize it -- voluntary repatriation doesn't apply in the case your discussing -- voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement in a third world country. If somebody leaves one country and knows that they are going to another country they don't need the UNHCR to find them a durable solution. They have a durable solution, they know where there going, so we've never been asked to be involved except in a very marginal way in that particular movement.

DERGHAM: And how are you involved?

WEISS-FAGEN: I think we facilitate some contacts. I'm a little bit rusty on this but when refugees used to leave the Soviet Union and go to Vienna and then go to Rome we were involved in some of those logistical movements that facilitated their resettlement either in Israel or the U.S. But really the basic effort involves the countries of resettlement whose own political processes have led them to accept certain numbers and they are screened by the governments of the countries to which they are going to be settled. We don't screen them.

STEELE: If we could turn to Africa, there have been extraordinary cross border flows in both directions sometimes at the same time within the same countries. Enormous repatriation and accommodation on the part of governments has been a feature of Africa that governments have tolerated each other's needy, often when they couldn't and in most cases when they couldn't

cater to their own needs or the needs of their own countrymen. Has the AIDS crisis in Africa complicated that ethic in any tangible way? We had a case of 80,000 Ugandans coming back from the Sudan last year. Uganda has been a country that has suffered extraordinarily from AIDS. One can imagine a sensitivity emerging as this pattern develops with people moving, migrants as well refugees, that the hospitality might be somewhat affected by the risks associated with large movements of people, uncontrolled movements of people. Are there any signs of that beginning to take hold in Africa today?

WEISS-FAGEN: I'm not aware of any rejection, any large scale rejection of refugees on the part of one African country toward another group of refugees because of AIDS. The issue comes up sometimes in the resettlement context, that is the resettlement countries. As you know, for instance, the U.S. has health screening so will that health screening apply to refugees or will it not apply to refugees and we would like refugees to be admitted and not to be excluded because of AIDS.

ROBINSON: Dr. Fagen, I'm sorry. I'm afraid that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

Our guest has been Patricia Weiss-Fagen, Public Information Officer for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. She was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by: Raghida Dergham of Al-Hayat, an Arabic daily of London; Ian Steele of the Press Foundation of Asia; and Linda Fasulo of WNYC Broadcasting.

I'm Claude Robinson. Thank you for joining us. We invite to be with us for next edition of **WORLD CHRONICLE**.

****

Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: **WORLD CHRONICLE**, United Nations, Room S-837, New York, New York 10017, USA.

WORLD CHRONICLE is broadcast worldwide and features guests whose work is concerned with major global issues. This programme is a public affairs presentation of this station from United Nations Radio and Television.